Whose needs are met?

Navigating tensions in academic language support at a Vietnamese EMI university

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In keeping with the marked expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) in Asian contexts, this study offers detailed evaluation of academic language support for EMI courses in a Vietnamese university. It explores academic language needs and current provision of support and challenges through the perceptions of multiple stakeholder groups: students, language instructors and content lecturers. Data was obtained from 10 semi-structured interviews with teaching staff and a questionnaire involving 175 students. Survey data was processed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics while interview data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated a general alignment between teachers' and students' views on students' current abilities, but a divergence in their perceptions of target academic language needs. Moreover, language and content teachers were found to offer support mostly in areas of writing and reading, and their focus was on either teaching generic skills or assisting content comprehension, respectively, rather than catering to subject-specific language as desired by students. Key challenges to their support were identified, including students' limited English proficiency and motivation, coordination issues and time constraints. Finally, practical implications regarding teachers' pedagogical roles and professional development, as well as institutional guidance in the implementation of language support in EMI contexts, were discussed.

Keywords: English-medium instruction (EMI), English for academic purposes (EAP), needs analysis, academic language support

Introduction

Driven by the internationalisation of higher education, an increasing number of universities worldwide have adopted English-medium instruction (EMI) policies,

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transitioning from using local language(s) to English for teaching academic content. This trend is particularly prominent in Asian tertiary contexts, where "EMI has become a centrepiece of macro-level language policy and planning over the past quarter century" (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017, p.3), resulting in a diverse array of EMI programmes operated in practice. In these contexts, EMI has often been promulgated with the expectations of enhancing academic quality and language proficiency; however, the realisation of such outcomes is not guaranteed due to contextual complexities and challenges. Scholars have raised concerns about students' linguistic readiness, questioning the benefits of EMI for both content acquisition and language gains (Hamid et al., 2013). It is also argued that successful implementation of EMI is largely contingent on "English language related variables": students' knowledge of the English language and academic literacy (Rose et al., 2019, p.10).

Therefore, it is important to acquire an in-depth understanding of students' current linguistic needs and the extent to which current support structures accommodate those needs to inform more effective implementation of EMI. Investigations at the micro level, featuring the perspectives and practices of key stakeholders, are needed to contextualise different support mechanisms in the rapidly evolving EMI landscapes of Asia (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020). Although research on EMI is expanding, fewer studies have focused specifically on language support in emerging contexts such as Vietnam. The present study contributes to this area by examining the suitability of academic language support at a Vietnamese EMI university, through the lens of three stakeholder groups: students, language instructors and content lecturers.

English-medium instruction

English-medium instruction is an instructional approach of using the English language to teach academic subjects in contexts where English is a second or a foreign language (ESL/EFL) (Macaro, 2018). Notably, EMI primarily focuses on academic content learning with "no direct reference to the aim of improving students' English" (Dearden & Macaro, 2016, p.456).

Although EMI is not defined for a particular educational level, "a close affinity between EMI and tertiary education" is frequently observed (Pecorari & Malmström, 2018, p.506). Globally, EMI was found to be permitted in over 90% of private universities and over 78% of public universities (Dearden, 2014). The EMI phenomenon in higher education can be attributed to the increasing status of English as a *lingua franca* and tertiary institutions' drive for internationalisation, which is often realised through "Englishisation" of their curricula to attract overseas students or to prepare home students for a globalised world (Galloway

& McKinley, 2021). In Asia, the rapid expansion of EMI has been largely associated with top-down educational policies. For example, a series of initiatives over the past two decades in China, such as Project 211 and Double First-Class Universities, have normalised English-taught disciplinary courses in the tertiary sector (Zhou & Rose, 2022).

Vietnam is no exception to this trend towards EMI, with a succession of far-reaching initiatives aimed at overhauling its higher education to prepare graduates for global engagement. In 2005, the government issued Decree 14/2005/NQCP, which designated the use of advanced educational curricula from top universities overseas as a key strategy for educational modernisation (Prime Minister's Office, 2005). This was followed by the National Foreign Languages Project (2008–2020) and its revision (2017–2025), denoting a significant transition in instructional approach, from English being the learning objective to a medium for subject instruction (Prime Minister's Office, 2008; 2017). Building on this momentum, the Ministry of Education and Training (2025) has proposed a draft project titled "Gradually introducing English as a second language in schools," scheduled for implementation from 2025 to 2035. These initiatives have deepened Vietnam's commitment to integrating English across the curriculum, leading to the development of diverse EMI offerings, such as advanced programmes, high-quality programmes and joint-degree programmes (Galloway & Sahan, 2021).

Language-related challenges in EMI

The rapid growth of EMI has not been unproblematic for tertiary institutions. EMI students have been reported to encounter a range of academic language-related challenges that undermine their capacity for content acquisition. These may include limited lecture comprehension due to insufficient vocabulary (Yao et al., 2021) and an inability to master academic written genres (Kamaşak et al., 2021), among others.

Recent research has explored whether there exists a critical threshold of *general* English proficiency students must cross to overcome *academic* language-related difficulties. Aizawa et al. (2020), in their mixed-methods study of Japanese EMI programmes, found that higher English language proficiency correlated with fewer discipline-related challenges. However, they observed "no discernible threshold" at which proficiency alone fully compensates for gaps in the academic language and literacy skills required for EMI (p. 855). This aligns with Rose et al. (2019), who showed that academic language skills "beyond those assessed by standard L2 proficiency tests" were the strongest predictor of EMI success (p. 2151). They thus recommended institutions to focus on supporting subject-specific lan-

guage and academic needs, rather than imposing fixed proficiency thresholds (Rose et al., 2019).

English for academic purposes

English for academic purposes (EAP) has been utilised to support EMI because it targets the discourse skills and genres needed for academic study. Although EAP and EMI differ in focus — one being language-oriented and the other content-oriented — they can be considered as "close relatives," as both address the demands academic English places on students (Galloway & Rose, 2022, p. 540). In Asian EFL contexts, such as Vietnam and Thailand, the emergence of EMI implementation has spurred a corresponding rise in English language support provision, ranging from stand-alone EAP classes to combined general and academic-English courses (Galloway & Sahan, 2021, p. 30).

The roles of language and content teachers

The growth of EMI prompts the question of whether language or content teachers are better suited to provide academic language support and the degree to which they can fulfil this role. Dearden (2018) referred to "a changing role for EMI academics" (p. 330) while Galloway and Rose (2021) noted "the expanding role of ELT practitioners" (p. 36), highlighting significant shifts in both groups' pedagogical responsibilities within EMI settings. Specifically, English language instructors may find that their traditional training in language pedagogy does not prepare them for the unique challenges of teaching EAP, such as navigating unfamiliar texts and genres specific to non-linguistic academic disciplines (Galloway & Rose, 2021). They are, however, expected to help students develop the academic literacy skills required in these domains, as Rose (2021) proposes, by pre-teaching students the requisite discipline-specific terminologies and introducing authentic, scaffolded activities that are closely aligned with the target EMI course tasks. Meanwhile, content-subject teachers, although not equipped with language pedagogies, are recommended to "make use of their own, and their students' own, linguistic repertoires" to support subject delivery (Rose, 2021, p. 161). It is also essential for them to gain some language awareness, alongside their discipline-specific expertise, to effectively communicate their subject to students via the English medium (Dearden, 2018).

Current gaps and research questions

Although the topic of EAP has garnered extensive attention in the field of language education, there remains a need for contextualised evaluation of academic language support in EMI environments. Much of the existing EAP scholarship revolves around Anglophone university settings, which "may not be entirely functionally comparable" to ESL/EFL contexts undertaking the transition to EMI, given their inherent differences in students' needs, backgrounds and educational policies (Galloway & Rose, 2022, p. 542). Research on language support for EMI has often focused on EAP courses and the views of students and/or language teachers, while integrated investigation including the extent of linguistic reinforcement in content classrooms is still lacking. Moreover, studies on EMI in Vietnam remain scarce compared to those in Europe (e.g., Doiz et al., 2019) and other parts of Asia (e.g., Galloway & Ruegg, 2020), despite the increasing proliferation of EMI provisions in the country. Exploring the implementation of EMI in this emerging context can yield valuable insights that not only enhance local educational practices but also contribute to the global discourse on EMI. The present study thus seeks to address these gaps and answer the following questions:

1. What are academic language needs for successful EMI study, as perceived by students, language instructors and content lecturers?
2. To what extent do language instructors and content lecturers respond to students' linguistic needs, as perceived by students and both groups of teachers?
3. What are the challenges in providing effective language support for EMI education, as perceived by both groups of teachers?

Methodology

This section outlines the study design, sampling strategy, data collection methods and analysis procedures.

Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods case-study design, combining qualitative and quantitative data to obtain in-depth information about a case. Specifically, it sought to explore the academic language support from various stakeholder perspectives, necessitating both statistical analyses of a large student sample to identify overarching patterns of learning needs and a qualitative analysis of teacher responses for nuanced insights into the support provision. It followed the convergent design, which allowed for concurrent collection and analyses of both data

types (Creswell & Clarke, 2018), with a focus on qualitative insights. Qualitative and quantitative findings were subsequently compared and combined in the interpretation stage.

The selected case is a Vietnamese university implementing EMI "Advanced Programmes" at the undergraduate level, developed in partnership with an overseas university from which the curricula were imported. At this university, EMI courses are delivered in English by content lecturers across three main majors: business, computing and graphic design. To prepare students for EMI study, the university requires either an B2 English proficiency level equivalent to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference or completion of a one-year English-for-general-purposes programme, followed by EAP courses taught by language instructors (see Table 1). These take place within students' first year of study, alongside a few content courses. The teaching staff comprises mainly local Vietnamese instructors, with a few international instructors using English as their first or second language.

Table 1. EAP courses

Course	Focus	Target students	Weekly hours	Duration
Academic English 1	Writing	Business	9 hours	7 weeks
Academic English 2	Integrated reading and writing	Business	9 hours	5 weeks
Academic English for non-business majors	Writing	Computing; graphic design	9 hours	3.5 weeks

Sampling

Students from first to third-year cohorts who had taken both EAP and EMI courses were purposively selected, yielding 175 participants across various majors (see Table 2). Purposive sampling was also used to select language teachers ($n = 4$) and content teachers ($n = 6$) with at least one year of relevant experience at the setting (see Table 3). To maintain anonymity, I used labels such as LT1 (language teacher 1) and CT1 (content teacher 1) and the pronoun "they" when referring to the interview subjects.

Data collection

Prior to data collection, participants' informed consent was obtained. A 65-item questionnaire was used to collect data among students. It included background

Table 2. Student participants ($n = 175$)

Category	Subcategory	Number of students	Percent
Year of study	First year	60	34%
	Second year	68	39%
	Third year	47	27%
Major of study	Computing	42	24%
	Business	128	73%
	Graphic design	5	3%
Gender	Male	86	49%
	Female	83	47%
	Other/prefer not to say	6	4%

Table 3. Teacher participants ($n = 10$)

Teacher	Department	Years of experience	
		In general	In EMI context
CT1	Business	2	1
CT2	Business	1	1
CT3	Computing	8	8
CT4	Business	16	16
CT5	Computing	7	6
CT6	Business	3	3
LT1	English language	4	2
LT2	English language	15	8
LT3	English language	6	2
LT4	English language	5	1

and demographic items, followed by rating-scale items (see Table 6), designed to tap into their views towards learning academic English skills. Two identical sets of 20 academic language subskill items, adapted from Evans and Morrison (2011) and using a four-point Likert scale (see Tables 4 and 5), were used to measure, for each subskill, the perceived importance and students' self-assessed current ability. The survey was distributed online via Qualtrics, available in both English and Vietnamese.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for a consistent yet adaptive approach to gathering data from teachers. Nineteen guiding questions — tailored for language teachers and content teachers — were categorised in four areas: (1) background, (2) students' learning needs, (3) support practice and (4) practical challenges. Questions on learning needs were calibrated to correspond with the student questionnaire for cross-referencing. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted via Zoom in English or Vietnamese based on interviewees' preferences.

A pilot study involving 17 students and one teacher was conducted. It led to refinement in the questionnaire, such as condensing the statement wording and replacing technical terms (e.g., EMI courses) with more accessible language (e.g., major-subject courses in English). Based on positive feedback from the teacher interview, no substantial changes were made to the interview schedule.

Data analysis

Quantitative survey data was processed in SPSS-28 using descriptive statistics to uncover patterns in students' general perceptions towards academic language support, target language needs and self-assessed ability. To identify significant differences in skill ratings, inferential statistics were applied to responses from two four-point Likert scales, treated as interval data. Due to non-normal distribution of the data, Friedman tests were conducted, followed by Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for pairwise comparisons. To evaluate differences across skills, the five responses per student for each skill were averaged, and these mean values were used in the analysis. Furthermore, a Spearman's Rank Correlation test was performed to examine the relationship between the students' ratings of skill importance and skill ability, following confirmation of scale suitability and a monotonic trend observed via heat maps across 20 pairs of variables. Open responses were thematically analysed to contextualise quantitative findings. Interview data was processed in NVivo-14 using thematic analysis, with key themes derived deductively from the research questions and the literature; meanwhile, and sub-themes identified inductively from the data.

Results

The results of the questionnaire and interview analyses are reported below.

Perceived academic language needs

This subsection addresses research question one, exploring stakeholders' views towards *target* academic language requirements for EMI study and students' *current* academic language abilities.

Students' views

To explore *target* requirements, quantitative analysis was performed on student responses to a 20-item section measuring perceived importance of academic language skills. Descriptive data for each item is shown in Table 4, with higher means indicating that students perceived certain skills to be more important for their success in EMI study. Overall, writing ($M = 3.30$) and listening ($M = 3.29$) were assigned higher level of importance, compared to reading ($M = 3.20$) and speaking ($M = 3.13$). A statistically significant difference was found in skill importance ratings, $\chi^2(3) = 26.987$, $p < .001$. Post hoc Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted with a Bonferroni correction ($p < .008$), showing no significant differences between reading and speaking ($z = -1.569$, $p = 0.117$) or between listening and writing ($z = -0.445$, $p = 0.656$). However, writing was rated significantly higher than both speaking ($z = -4.554$, $p < .001$) and reading ($z = -2.942$, $p = .003$), as was listening compared to speaking ($z = -4.581$, $p < .001$) and reading ($z = -3.312$, $p < .001$). This suggests writing and listening were perceived as significantly more important skills.

Further, descriptive results showed that *Citing/referencing academic sources* ($M = 3.53$), *Understanding the main ideas of lectures*" ($M = 3.43$), *Identifying the key ideas of a subject-specific text* ($M = 3.36$) and *Presenting subject-specific information* ($M = 3.26$) were the most important subskills across the four domains. Statistically significant differences were found in subskill ratings within writing ($\chi^2(4) = 50.635$, $p < 0.001$), listening ($\chi^2(4) = 32.658$, $p < .001$), reading ($\chi^2(4) = 55.913$, $p < .001$) and speaking ($\chi^2(4) = 15.893$, $p = .003$). However, post hoc Wilcoxon signed-rank tests ($p < .005$) showed that *Citing/referencing academic sources* was the only subskill rated significantly higher than the others within its category, i.e., *Structuring written assignments* ($z = -4.346$, $p < .001$), *Using appropriate academic writing style* ($z = -4.835$, $p < .001$), *Summarising/paraphrasing ideas in sources* ($z = -5.800$, $p < .001$) and *Expressing ideas clearly and logically* ($z = -3.499$, $p < .001$). This indicates that the participants perceived this subskill as more important compared to the others.

To explore students' *current* perceived abilities, quantitative analysis was conducted on the other set of 20 skill items. Table 5 displays the descriptive data for each item, where lower means suggest that students faced more challenges in those areas. While the data suggested that students self-rated their abilities

Table 4. Students' perceived importance of academic language skills

Items	Skill importance	
	Mean[a]	Std. deviation
Structuring written assignments	3.26	0.76
Using appropriate academic writing style	3.25	0.70
Citing/referencing academic sources	3.53	0.70
Summarising/paraphrasing ideas in sources	3.17	0.71
Expressing ideas clearly and logically	3.30	0.74
Writing overall	3.30	0.56
Understanding disciplinary materials	3.32	0.74
Working out the meaning of difficult vocabulary	3.01	0.82
Identifying the key ideas of a subject-specific text	3.36	0.70
Reading quickly to find specific information	3.28	0.74
Taking brief, relevant notes whilst reading	3.03	0.84
Reading overall	3.20	0.58
Speaking accurately (grammar)	3.11	0.82
Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	3.15	0.81
Presenting subject-specific information	3.26	0.76
Participating actively in discussion	3.14	0.74
Asking and answering questions	3.02	0.80
Speaking overall	3.13	0.62
Understanding the main ideas of lectures	3.43	0.69
Understanding the overall organisation of lectures	3.34	0.73
Understanding key/technical vocabulary	3.24	0.76
Taking brief, clear notes whilst listening	3.16	0.75
Following a discussion	3.30	0.79
Listening overall	3.29	0.59

a. On a scale from 1–4, where 1 = not important and 4 = very important.

in reading ($M = 3.04$) and writing ($M = 3.04$) to be lower than those in listening ($M = 3.06$) and speaking ($M = 3.13$), these observed differences were not statistically significant, as shown by the results of the Friedman test ($\chi^2(3) = 6.443$, $p = .092$). Within each domain, students identified *Using appropriate academic*

writing style ($M = 2.89$), *Working out the meaning of difficult vocabulary* ($M = 2.70$), *Speaking accurately (grammar)* ($M = 2.98$) and *Understanding key/technical vocabulary* ($M = 2.88$) as the most challenging subskills requiring more support. Statistically significant differences were found in subskill ratings within writing ($\chi^2(4) = 68.299$, $p < .001$), listening ($\chi^2(4) = 27.736$, $p < .001$), reading ($\chi^2(4) = 104.080$, $p < .001$) and speaking ($\chi^2(4) = 22.516$, $p < .001$). However, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests ($p < .005$) revealed that only *Understanding key/technical vocabulary* received a significantly lower rating than all the other listening subskills, i.e., *Understanding the main ideas of lectures* ($z = -4.064$, $p < .001$), *Understanding the overall organisation of lectures* ($z = -4.076$, $p < .001$), *Taking brief, clear notes whilst listening* ($z = -3.080$, $p < .002$) and *Following a discussion* ($z = -3.960$, $p < .001$). Similarly, *Working out the meaning of difficult vocabulary* was rated significantly lower than most other reading subskills, i.e., *Identifying key ideas of a subject-specific text* ($z = -6.194$, $p < .001$), *Reading quickly to find specific information* ($z = -7.131$, $p < .001$) and *Taking brief, relevant notes whist reading* ($z = -4.976$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that vocabulary-related aspects were a recurring challenge across skills for students.

To determine the relationship between students' perceptions of skill importance (target requirements) and their skill ability, a Spearman's rank correlation was performed. Significant positive correlations ($p < .05$) were found for 17 of 20 skill items (see the Appendix). This means that skill items rated as more important were generally associated with higher self-rated proficiency and lower perceived support needs. The strongest correlations were observed in writing items: *Using appropriate academic writing style* [r_s (169) = .374, $p < .001$] and *Summarising/paraphrasing ideas in sources* [r_s (166) = .372, $p < .001$]. These results suggest that while students found these subskills more challenging, they were less likely to perceive them as critical for academic success.

Teachers' views

Contrary to the quantitative results showing students' prioritisation of writing and listening skills, the interview data revealed a strong consensus among teachers (5/6 CTs; 3/4 LTs) that academic reading is the most critical skill for EMI study. They reiterated the need for students to thoroughly engage with subject-specific materials, as illustrated by this: "For the subjects I teach, which are management and marketing, there're a lot of textual works. Students need to read and understand first. . . [to] apply the key concepts and … deliver in terms of their assignments" (CT6-business).

Writing also emerged as a key determinant of students' academic success, as "the assessment mainly involves written components" (CT4-business). Con-

Table 5. Students' perceived ability in academic language skills

Items	Skill ability	
	Mean[a.]	Std. deviation
Structuring written assignments	3.05	0.80
Using appropriate academic writing style	2.89	0.79
Citing/referencing academic sources	3.39	0.80
Summarising/paraphrasing ideas in sources	3.01	0.85
Expressing ideas clearly and logically	2.91	0.77
Writing overall	3.04	0.60
Understanding disciplinary materials	2.87	0.80
Working out the meaning of difficult vocabulary	2.70	0.88
Identifying the key ideas of a subject-specific text	3.14	0.81
Reading quickly to find specific information	3.35	0.78
Taking brief, relevant notes whilst reading	3.12	0.93
Reading overall	3.04	0.65
Speaking accurately (grammar)	2.98	0.90
Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	3.15	0.90
Presenting subject-specific information	3.06	0.86
Participating actively in discussion	3.26	0.77
Asking and answering questions	3.25	0.83
Speaking overall	3.13	0.65
Understanding the main ideas of lectures	3.12	0.79
Understanding the overall organisation of lectures	3.12	0.80
Understanding key/technical vocabulary	2.88	0.84
Taking brief, clear notes whilst listening	3.09	0.94
Following a discussion	3.13	0.85
Listening overall	3.06	0.71

a. On a scale from 1–4, where 1 = I can't do it at all and 4 = I can do it on my own.

sistent with students' views, half of the teachers (3/6 CTs; 2/4 LTs) explicitly acknowledged the importance of subskills such as using citations and synthesising information. Listening and speaking skills were not prioritised, with speaking described as "not typically essential" for assignments (LT2) and listening gaps could be offset by reading (CT3-computing). Nonetheless, both groups of teachers acknowledged their importance for effective communication in EMI, includ-

ing lecture comprehension, peer collaboration on projects and delivering presentations.

When asked about students' most persistent linguistic challenges, most teachers cited issues related to vocabulary and writing and reading skills. Both language (3/4) and content instructors (4/6) expressed concerns about students' limited vocabulary, lack of critical evaluation skills and heavy reliance on translation tools, which often resulted in "lost context" and inaccurate understanding (CT2-business). Regarding writing, teachers generally agreed that while students could quickly grasp aspects such as formatting and referencing through EAP course, many struggle with formal academic writing styles, with some works resembling "spoken language more than academic writing" (CT4-business). Most teachers (4/6 CTs; 2/4 LTs) also mentioned the need for improving speaking and listening skills, noting that "in a class of 25, there may be six or seven students who can communicate well in English" (CT5-computing).

Addressing academic language needs

This section answers the second research question by analysing data from the questionnaire and interviews, highlighting students' and teachers' perspectives on the extent of support provided in relation to the perceived academic language needs.

Students' views

Based on the questionnaire data (see Table 6), students exhibited greater agreement regarding the role of content teachers in facilitating their academic English development ($M = 3.18$), compared to language teachers ($M = 2.91$). Open survey responses reinforced this, with students calling for more subject-relevant support: "academic English [classes] provided broad vocabulary, but we need to know more about technical terms."

Generally, students viewed the support received positively, believing that EAP classes taught them the essential skills required for EMI ($M = 3.02$) and subject lecturers effectively helped them with academic language ($M = 3.03$). Their open responses highlighted the usefulness of EAP lessons in areas of citations, paraphrasing, essay structures and reading strategies to their EMI study. Nevertheless, some raised concerns about the limited focus on listening and speaking, and a disconnect from disciplinary discourse. Regarding support from content lecturers, students favoured their subject-specific support practices, including "providing contextual explanation for specific concepts" and "offering guidance in written assignments."

Table 6. Students' perceptions of academic English support

Items	Mean[a]	Std. deviation
I believe that major subject classes should be supplemented with academic English classes provided by language teachers.	2.91	0.80
I believe that subject lecturers should help students improve academic English proficiency.	3.18	0.81
I believe that the academic English classes taught me the language skills I needed the most to succeed in learning my major subjects via English.	3.02	0.78
I believe that subject lecturers have effectively supported me in learning academic language.	3.03	0.74
I believe the materials in English in major subject classes are suitable and easily accessible for me.	2.94	0.75

a. On a scale from 1–4, where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree.

Teachers' views

All the teachers ($n = 10$) unanimously emphasised the necessity of providing academic language support to students in EMI contexts; however, their views on pedagogical responsibilities and areas of linguistic support varied. Half of the content teachers (3/6) felt their role was teaching academic content exclusively, rather than academic English, believing that "quality controls" should ensure students have adequate language skills (CT2-business) and that language teachers already provided necessary support. In contrast, the other half saw their roles as facilitating students' learning in a broader context, where "content would come first and English would be a close second" (CT6-business). While these lecturers recognised the importance of language support for enhancing content comprehension and meeting students' language learning expectations, they felt they were not "the best person to help on linguistic aspects" (CT6-business). Meanwhile, all four language instructors perceived their key role asto prepare students for the linguistic demands common across EMI disciplines, by introducing "an overview of academic literacy" (LT2), rather than offering support tailored to any specific fields. LT4 highlighted their adoption of a general, skills-based approach to EAP that "helped students differentiate between academic and everyday language," while admitting that their provision of content-relevant linguistic support remained "mostly superficial."

Regarding support practices, all six subject lecturers, regardless of whether they perceived their roles as content-only or content-focused teaching, found themselves "helping students with academic language out of necessity" (CT5-computing). However, the extent of their support varied significantly, rang-

ing from merely motivational support, e.g., "encouraging students to read materials in English" (CT1-business), to offering comprehension strategies, including translation. For instance, CT3-computing considered referencing students' first language as essential to their support practice: "English has its role, but it shouldn't come at the expense of content knowledge. So when English poses difficulties for students … I helped by providing further explanation or materials in Vietnamese." Other strategies to enhance students' comprehension were also employed, including speaking at a slower pace, using simpler language and starting with scenario-based activities before introducing complex subject matter. It was highlighted that their instructional adaptation is not aimed at "watering down or lowering the standard," but rather "making the content more accessible for students" (CT6-business). The findings further revealed some lecturers' efforts in reinforcing academic language skills, particularly in writing and vocabulary. CT4-business, for instance, reported using published papers to model writing and analyse "how authors expressed the terms and structured their works." Others described offering a "guiding session" (CT2-business) or "reintroducing essential writing aspects" (CT3-computing) at the course outset, informed by anticipated content and recurring student errors. However, such support approach was brief and informal, as "it's not part of the curriculum" (CT3-computing), suggesting a reactive rather than proactive approach to addressing writing challenges within the course structure.

Moreover, nearly all the lecturers (5/6) engaged in language support through constructive feedback on students' written drafts and assignments, though the focus and depth of feedback varied. CT2-business gave class-wide feedback on common errors, typically in sentence structures and vocabulary, while CT5-computing occasionally noted structural errors and CT3-computing focused mainly on domain-specific concepts. Of those provided linguistic feedback, only two considered language use as a key assessment criterion; the rest prioritised content, with CT3-computing asserting that "language errors don't significantly impact students' grades."

As for language instructors, they prioritised support in areas of writing and reading, aligned with the designated EAP curricula. Writing subskills, including plagiarism awareness and referencing, were reported to be essential components of their instruction. This practice was informed by their needs evaluation, as they found that these subskills essential for "all written assignments regardless of disciplines" (LT1) and "students often raised concerns about sources and references" (LT4). To support reading, language instructors adapted course content and materials, such as incorporating discussion activities (LT1) or reducing required readings while adding follow-up tasks to balance syllabus coverage with "deeper exploration of the content" (LT2). Similarly, LT3 designed alternative

exercises that encourage open-ended responses and the integration of sources, believing that "multiple-choice reading comprehension questions in the coursebook are not directly applicable to the reading tasks required in EMI classrooms." Further efforts to align support with disciplinary content were evident, including "incorporating relevant journal articles into skimming/scanning practice" (LT1), and "exploring domain-specific concepts, such as 'tariff' and 'quota' in reading" (LT2). However, these adaptations were often shaped by the instructors' assumptions of "certain sets of skills and terminologies [that were] relevant" rather than by a clear understanding of the actual linguistic demands in EMI courses (LT3). Similarly, LT4 questioned the efficacy of their guidance on subject-relevant concepts, since they "don't have the relevant expertise" and "have to rely on independent research." This suggests that while instructors aim to provide tailored linguistic support, their limited access to concrete insights into EMI-specific linguistic and disciplinary requirements may inadvertently lead to a disconnect between the support offered and the actual challenges students face.

Challenges in support practices

This section addresses the third research question, using interview data with the teachers, to explore their perceptions of the challenges in delivering adequate language support in the EMI programmes.

Students' proficiency and motivation

All 10 teachers concurred that the primary obstacles to effective support were students' low English proficiency and their lack of motivation. LT1 noted that many lacked a solid foundation for studying EAP courses: "they struggled to write a well structured sentence, let alone a coherent academic essay." Language teachers also expressed concern that students often prioritised short-term goals, such as "passing the [language] course" over "the skills they gain" (LT4). This reflects a broader issue where students may fail to recognise the significance of these skills beyond the immediate context of EAP classes, potentially undermining their motivation to engage with available language support.

As for content lecturers, they observed that students' limited English abilities, coupled with increasingly complicated content in EMI classes, often led to a loss of confidence, disengagement or even programme withdrawal (CT2-business). CT2-business further claimed that "some lack the confidence to write independently and resort to translation tools or AI software" to navigate their way through assignments, rather than seeking help from the lecturers. Others highlighted the significance of students' initiative, stressing that "unless they communicate their

difficulties, we [lecturers] cannot know and allocate enough resources to support them" (CT4-business).

Lack of coordination

Most teachers (4/6 CTs; 3/4 LTs) mentioned the lack of coordination between language and content-subject departments as another hindering factor. LT3 asserted that although the business courses were the "target contexts" that they aimed to address, there were "virtually no connections between English and business teachers." LT1 struggled to deliver subject-specific support without knowing "what exact areas of business or content students are studying" and expressed a need to understand subject lecturers' grading criteria and expectations to better align EAP instruction.

Interestingly, content lecturers acknowledged being "not familiar with the language programmes" (CT2-business) and "unclear about the language department" (CT3-computing), yet expected academic language classes to be "more intensive" (CT1-business) and "better tailored to students' specialised majors" (CT3-computing). CT2-business noted the absence of "a refresher course on academic writing" or "on-going support" by language experts in the second and final years of study — resources that they "could have referred struggling students to." Content lecturers identified a gap in the language support in those years, since they perceived themselves as "not the appropriate person for this" (CT6-business) and considered it "unfair to slow down … to accommodate a group of struggling students" (CT2-business).

Time constraints

Time and scheduling constraints were seen as barriers to providing meaningful language support. CT2-business mentioned that the subject curriculum was already dense, leaving little room for "peripheral stuff like academic writing and referencing." Language instructors shared similar frustrations, noting that EAP courses offered "insufficient curriculum time" to adequately prepare students, particularly non-business majors, for the demands of academic discourse. LT1 stressed that "language support should have been provided consistently throughout students' study, rather than only at the beginning and then stop." Content lecturers agreed that there needs to be "sustained academic language support" (CT2-business) as academic writing cannot be acquired in a few weeks, but is rather a process that can "take years" to refine (CT4-business).

Discussion

The study's first goal was to determine students' academic language learning needs within the EMI context. Students rated academic language skills across all four domains as important, a result mirroring previous EAP needs analysis studies (Huang, 2013). However, they assigned different levels of priority to these domains, as the students regarded writing and listening as paramount, while the teaching staff predominantly subscribed to the notion of "reading comes first and then writing" (CT2-business). These differing priorities likely reflect the distinct roles of students and teachers within the academic environment. Teachers, focusing on developing students' academic skills and knowledge, viewed reading as foundational for mastering discipline-specific discourse and accessing academic content (Grabe & Stoller, 2014). Students, however, might perceive listening skills, such as lecture comprehension, as more immediately relevant to their academic experiences. Moreover, the interview data indicated that students often rely on translation tools to bridge their language gaps when approaching textual materials in English, which might diminish the perceived significance of English reading proficiency. Such assistance is less applicable to listening, which demands real-time processing of the spoken content during lectures.

Regarding current linguistic needs, both teacher groups reported academic reading, writing and vocabulary as the key challenging areas for students. Writing and vocabulary have been underscored as "a chronic problem in EMI contexts" (Kamaşak et al., 2021, p. 11), particularly for Vietnamese students (Hoang et al., 2023). Unlike self-reported surveys highlighting speaking difficulties (Aizawa et al., 2020; Kamaşak et al., 2021), this study found students rated their speaking skills rather positively, with no statistically significant differences in ratings of ability across skills.

Overall, the findings indicated alignment between language and content teachers regarding the target skills requirements and students' current learning needs; however, such alignment did not extend to student' own perceptions. Correlation analyses showed that the skills the students found challenging or requiring additional support differ somewhat from those they deemed important. To illustrate, they ranked *Using appropriate academic writing style* as the most challenging, yet among the least important subskills, while language and content teachers unanimously emphasised both its difficulty and significance for academic success. As Liu et al. (2011) suggested, students may prioritise skill development based not on their lack of competence, but on what they perceive as most relevant to their academic goals. This perceptual gap may also reflect students' limited ability to accurately assess their own competence or discern "what

is required of them to perform competently in their programme of study" (Huang, 2010, p. 533).

The study's second goal examined how each group of teachers responded to students' language needs. It was found that the students' expectations for subject-specific language guidance did not match the teachers' beliefs about their pedagogical roles. The language instructors viewed their responsibility as providing a general foundation in academic literacy, expecting content lecturers to offer discipline-specific language support. Conversely, content lecturers believed that academic language support was outside their responsibilities or expertise, and thus only engaged in it "out of necessity." This lack of clarity over the support roles resonated with the observations by Galloway & Ruegg (2020) in Chinese and Japanese EMI contexts. The division in pedagogical orientations between language and content teachers, while seemingly pragmatic given their designated curricula, training and expertise, can limit the integrated, content-relevant language support essential for students' success in EMI settings.

Secondly, the teachers focused their support on writing, reading and vocabulary, areas they identified as the most important and challenging for their students. However, the nature of support provided varied between groups. With reading, language instructors used comprehension questions and text analysis based on their assumptions of EMI course demands, whereas content lecturers resorted to providing translated materials or simply encouraging students to read in English. In writing, language instructors followed a structured approach, including guided practice, freer practice and on-going corrective feedback, aligned with their syllabus. Content lecturers' writing support occurred sporadically, typically through brief reviews at the start of their course or assignment feedback, with linguistic features often treated as "peripheral" and not factored into assessment. These results suggested content lecturers' emphasis on content accessibility overlanguage development in their support practice (Jiang et al., 2019).

The last research question explored challenges in the teachers' provision of academic language support. A key issue, identified by both groups of teachers, was students' limited English proficiency and motivation. Those with weaker language skills often struggled to follow course content, which led to diminished motivation, while low motivation reduced their willingness to invest in language improvement. It is, therefore, recommended that the institution work closely with teachers to develop rigorous language requirements and evaluation procedures at admission, alongside preparatory programmes to ensure students' readiness for EAP and EMI courses. Moreover, low motivation may stem from students' limited awareness of the relevance of academic language to their disciplinary success (Jiang et al., 2019). Clear communication with students of the programme expec-

tations, intended learning outcomes and the transition of linguistic skills between EAP and EMI courses should be established to help them navigate their study.

Aligned with Galloway & Ruegg, 2020, the study identified coordination issues: language and content teachers were found to operate within their own spheres, with minimal understanding of each other's expectations, course content and assessment. This lack of awareness hindered their capacity to align their instructional approaches in a complementary manner. The findings also revealed that the provision of discipline-specific support was not systematically implemented but relied on EAP instructors' "assumptions" about target needs and their corresponding interventions. Time constraints exacerbated this situation, as language instructors found EAP course duration "insufficient" to prepare students for EMI and content lecturers mentioned not having enough curriculum space to address linguistic needs.

In tackling these challenges, one viable approach is to foster regular and structured channels of communication among teaching staff so that they can share expertise and collaboratively reinforce academic skills across disciplines. As Jiang et al. (2019) argue, EAP curriculum design should be "informed by genuine EMI classroom settings and updated in a real-time manner" (p. 116). This requires not just individual effort but broader institutional commitment through supportive policy, professional development, curriculum design and administrative backing. For example, institutions may allocate time for cross-departmental training and progress-review meetings, to help bridge the disciplinary gap and promote shared goals among stakeholders.

Implications and conclusion

The study suggests that recognising and addressing disparities in stakeholders' perceptions of needs and support roles is essential for effective implementation of language support across the curriculum. This can be achieved by conducting thorough needs analyses at both the classroom and institutional levels, alongside clear communication among students, teaching staff and institutional leaders about roles, expectations and shared goals. Echoing Galloway and Rose (2021), the study stresses the need for on-going language support targeting specific discourse and skills demanded in EMI. This requires language and content teachers to work in collaboration, informing each other of their instructional and assessment approaches, collectively re-examining EAP course design and devising support strategies that integrate language development with subject-matter comprehension.

As the findings indicated, when teachers perceive discipline-specific language support as *not* within their remit, they may refrain from incorporating it into their teaching or engaging in cross-disciplinary collaboration. Thus, professional development is essential in helping teachers re-envision their roles and navigate the changing pedagogical landscapes in EMI contexts, where the traditional dichotomy of language-only or content-only instruction may no longer suffice to meet the complex needs of students. This study also calls for institutions' systemic approach to curriculum mapping and materials development for EAP and EMI courses, ensuring that subject-relevant language support is not isolated attempts but systematically integrated into the instructional practices across disciplines.

It is important to note the limitations of this study. Firstly, the data was collected from one Vietnamese university, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Research in other settings is needed to enable a clearer picture of language support provision, its suitability and potential developments amid the global growth of EMI. Moreover, the sample may not represent the target population, as only a few students and no teachers from the graphic design discipline were included. The use of differing data collection methods — survey responses for students and interviews for teachers — may also limit comparability. Future studies could adopt broader sampling and data collection methods to strengthen the comparability and robustness of the findings.

This study examined the suitability of academic language support at a Vietnamese EMI university, based on needs analyses, conceptualisation of support roles, support practices and challenges — areas that have been underreported. The findings imply that the provision of support in this context warrants not only closer attention but a recalibration to better align with the evolving needs of EMI students and expectations of stakeholders. As Doiz et al. (2019) note, while the inclusion of language support to enrich EMI classrooms is promising, it necessitates "decision-makers at the university [to] establish and define language-learning objectives as part of the goals of EMI" (p. 82). This paper advocates for a more holistic, integrated approach to language support within EMI, fostering collaboration among teaching staff, in order to realise the hoped-for "double gain" in students' language and content development in EMI education.

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Appendix. Spearman's rank correlation test results

Table 7. Spearman's Rank correlation results for skill importance and skill ability ratings

Items	Spearman's correlation coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed) p
Writing		
Structuring written assignments	.272	.000
Using appropriate academic writing style	.374	.000
Citing/referencing academic sources	.282	.000
Summarising/paraphrasing ideas in sources	.372	.000
Expressing ideas clearly and logically	.305	.000
Reading		
Understanding disciplinary materials	.120	.117
Working out the meaning of difficult vocabulary	.260	.000
Identifying the key ideas of a subject-specific text	.320	.000
Reading quickly to find specific information	.226	.003
Taking brief, relevant notes whilst reading	.251	.000
Speaking		
Speaking accurately (grammar)	.177	.021
Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	.278	.000
Presenting subject-specific information	.221	.004
Participating actively in discussion	.074	.348

Table 7. *(continued)*

Items	Spearman's correlation coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed) p
Asking and answering questions	.135	.085
Listening		
Understanding the main ideas of lectures	.262	.000
Understanding the overall organisation of lectures	.272	.000
Understanding key/technical vocabulary	.242	.002
Taking brief, clear notes whilst listening	.170	.027
Following a discussion	.320	.000

Tóm tắt (Vietnamese abstract)

Nghiên cứu đánh giá việc hỗ trợ ngôn ngữ học thuật trong chương trình giảng dạy bằng tiếng Anh (EMI) tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Qua 10 cuộc phỏng vấn với giảng viên và khảo sát 175 sinh viên, nghiên cứu tìm hiểu nhu cầu học, thực trạng hỗ trợ và thách thức từ góc nhìn sinh viên, giảng viên ngôn ngữ và giảng viên chuyên ngành. Kết quả cho thấy giảng viên và sinh viên có góc nhìn tương đồng về năng lực của sinh viên, nhưng khác biệt trong đánh giá về nhu cầu tiếng Anh học thuật. Giảng viên ngôn ngữ chú trọng kỹ năng học thuật tổng quát, còn giảng viên chuyên ngành hỗ trợ hiểu nội dung, thay vì đáp ứng ngôn ngữ chuyên ngành theo mong muốn của sinh viên. Thách thức chính gồm trình độ tiếng Anh và động lực của sinh viên, sự phối hợp giữa giảng viên và hạn chế thời gian. Nghiên cứu nêu hàm ý về vai trò sư phạm và phát triển chuyên môn của giảng viên, cũng như định hướng của nhà trường trong công tác hỗ trợ ngôn ngữ tại bối cảnh EMI.

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